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SUBJECT: FRENCH OFFICIALS WARN OF INCREASED TERRORIST THREAT

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR BRUCE TURNER FOR REASONS 1.5
(b) AND (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: With the anniversary of September 11 as a backdrop, the threat of terrorism is once again on the minds of the French public. Though not the leading story in most print or television media, a dramatic front page article on September 14 in the widely circulated French daily, Le Figaro, pictured Bin Laden,s deputy threatening France and the French people in a video message intended to mark the New York events. He confirmed that the Algerian terrorist group, GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), was now part of al-Qaeda and called on Muslims to join its fight against the French, whom he referred to as traitors and non-believers. (Note: GSPC is a militant Islamist group founded in 1998 as a splinter organization of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA). The goal of the GIA was to overthrow the Algerian government; they were responsible for several terrorist attacks against the French, including the hijacking of Air France flight 8969 in December 1994 from Algiers.) GOF officials are subtly and carefully sensitizing the public to the increased possibility of an attack either on French soil or against French nationals abroad. At the same time, they are tactfully highlighting the work of the government to prevent terrorist attacks, and reviewing the justification of the measures taken to provide adequate protections. For most of the French, many of whom lived through several waves of attacks in the 80s and 90s and who count their victims at more than 3,000, the question is not if, but when the next attack will occur. Should an attack occur, national security could become a major campaign issue in the upcoming 2007 presidential election now only several months away. END SUMMARY.

2 (C) The director of the Interior Ministry,s Unit for Coordination of the Fight Against Terrorism (UCLAT), Christophe Chaboud, has been unusually visible in recent days. He and other, mostly anonymous, officials have been careful to say that the GOF has no knowledge of specific terrorist threats, but that current trends and circumstances suggest that the risk to France and French nationals abroad is substantially increasing. Chaboud specifically underlined the possible threat to the homeland at sites of national importance (read: visible tourist sites or high-profile government buildings), or to those associated with Israel or the Jewish people. Alluding to, but not specifically mentioning Ayman al-Zawahiri,s announcement, he stressed that al-Qaeda is strong and remains a source of significant and very dangerous propaganda. Access to al-Qaeda propaganda and that of similar groups through the internet, French officials worry, has created a situation where susceptible young people are easily targeted for radicalization. They stress that instances of "self-radicalization" are on the

rise, and that resulting radicalized cells are very difficult to identify and counter.

13. (C) Chaboud and other French officials have publicly noted that the recent release (under the Algerian government's amnesty program aimed at fostering national reconciliation) of more than 2,200 Algerian terrorists, who were once associated with the GIA (which was responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in France and against French nationals) could give GSPC a recruiting pool of hardened criminals with a background in perpetrating attacks. In fact, the emir of GSPC has already called on former GIA members to join his organization. There is a serious concern in France that these individuals could form active terrorist cells in Europe. French officials already publicly admit that the GSPC is present on the continent, including on French territory.

14. (C) The 2004 law banning headscarves in public schools and French military participation in UNIFIL were cited by al-Zawahiri as attacks by France on Islam. Government officials have previously warned the public that such politically sensitive issues would be used as propaganda tools to incite others to radical violence. It was clear from the GOF's hesitation to contribute forces to UNIFIL that this was taken into account in their engagement strategy, although it did not keep France from shouldering what it considers to be its responsibility in international affairs. French participation in ISAF has also long been considered in France to be risk factor in terms of Muslim opinion at home and around the world, although this has not deterred France from doing its part in the war on terror. At the same time, the government's policy rhetoric appears to have shifted towards winning the "battle of ideas," as

PARIS 00006199 002 OF 002

outlined in their counterterrorism policy.

15. (C) In addition to calling attention to the growing threat of terrorism, the government has highlighted its accomplishments in the field and its ongoing efforts to battle terrorism. Chaboud recently acknowledged in an interview for the first time, since the story broke in the Washington Post, the existence of a Paris-based international unit dubbed "Alliance Base" that helps coordinate efforts against radical Islamist terrorism. In a separate interview, Chaboud defended the use of video surveillance, and maintained that, if properly administered, it does not infringe on individual liberties and is an essential tool in fighting terrorism. Another article in the September 14 edition of the Le Figaro states that France's intelligence service, the DST, recently arrested its 400th suspect. The suspect is allegedly part of a group of young French men whose goal was to go fight against the American military in Iraq. While French officials express confidence in their ability to protect France from terrorist attacks, they also acknowledge that France is vulnerable to attack and all planned attacks cannot be successfully pre-empted.

16. (C) COMMENT: With the anniversary of September 11 just past, French soldiers deploying in southern Lebanon, perceptions that campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq are at a critical phase, a watershed presidential election looming in 2007, and now an explicit threat-- there is probably good reason for government officials to warn of a heightened threat of terrorist attack. Sensitizing the public to the possibility of an attack at home (or in Lebanon) against French nationals or soldiers serves to both increase vigilance and protect the government against charges of negligence should an attack occur.

17. (C) That said, it's worth noting that al-Zawahiri's warning against France was the fourth or fifth story on most evening news broadcasts. The French have long endured the threat of terrorism and are not easily intimidated. Should an attack occur, however, national security and counterterrorism

policies could easily take on increased significance in the 2007 presidential elections. For presumed center-right presidential candidate, Nicolas Sarkozy, currently Minister of Interior with responsibilities for counterterrorism, this is especially likely to be the case. END COMMENT

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